

# Philippines: What can workers expect under new President Duterte?

Wednesday 21 September 2016, by [TORRES Estrella](#) (Date first published: 30 June 2016).

It's been more than a month since the presidential elections in the Philippines and 19-year-old Joseph still wears a wristband bearing the name of President Rodrigo Duterte as he carries out minor auto repairs and washes cars at a workshop in Pasay City, just south of the capital city, Manila.

"Duterte is tough. He will lift us from poverty," says Joseph when asked why he voted for Duterte who was inaugurated as president today.

Joseph finishes his eight-hour day at 22.00 and then, along with five of his young workmates, sleeps in a cramped room above the shop. They are allowed one day off per week.

Vulnerable workers like Joseph – who make up approximately 30 per cent of the Filipino workforce – played a critical role in Duterte's landslide win in the May elections.

His campaign promise to end the contractualisation of jobs in the Philippines secured many votes from the working classes. Sonny Matula, chairman of Federation of Free Workers (FFW) said Duterte's vow to eradicate crime, drug trafficking and corruption also appealed to the poorest members of Philippine society.

Duterte's next six years will be challenging for a number of reasons, particularly due to rising unemployment levels [1]. Between January and April 2016 the number of those out of work rose from 2.466 million to 2.594 million.

Duterte, a 71-year-old, seven-time mayor of Davao City, is so well-known for his abrasive personality and foul-mouth that he is frequently compared to Donald Trump. He cursed Pope Francis during his campaign, made an unspeakably crass comment about a rape victim and advocated the mass execution of criminals.

"If I become president," he said during his campaign, "I advise you people to put up several funeral parlour businesses. They will be packed. I'll supply the dead bodies."

## Threats against unionists

Duterte is also notorious in the international trade union movement for his incendiary comments against the Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU, or 1 May Union), made at an election rally in February. While discussing his plans to establish economic zones to attract foreign investment, Duterte warned KMU to stop trying to organise workers in these areas. "I myself am pleading with you. We are one in ideology. [But] do not do that because you will destroy my administration. If you do that, I will kill you all".

Surprisingly, trade unionists in the Philippines don't think their new president is anti-union.

KMU chairperson Elmer Labog, told *Equal Times* that "members do not take Duterte's threats

seriously,” pointing to the fact that a few days later, Duterte appointed KMU Vice President Mindanao Joel Maglunsod as the new undersecretary for the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE).

“The appointment is a welcome act and recognition of the role of militant groups in the labour sector. It is our right to organise workers, even in economic zones. These rights are guaranteed under international labour conventions”.

During the elections, the country’s two biggest national centres, the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP) and the Alliance of Labor Unions (ALU), endorsed Duterte because of his pro-worker platform and their belief in his capacity to implement it.

However, the Federation of Free Workers (FFW) did not officially endorse Duterte and SENTRO (Sentro ng mga Nagkakaisa at Progresibong Manggagawa, or the Center of United and Progressive Workers) told *Equal Times* that it had no position on the new Duterte administration.

FFW chairman Sonny Matula said that his union’s experience of Duterte has been largely positive. “We had a good experience with him in Davao many years ago when we had a strike at the Ateneo de Davao University. The FFW was helping employees who were negotiating on wages, benefits and the illegal termination of the union president Virginia Camus.

“Then a mayor of Davao, Duterte successfully mediated our labour dispute and both parties agreed to end the strike and sign a collective bargaining agreement through his mediation,” said Matula.

### **Violation of workers’ rights**

But the unions are not resting on their laurels. TUCP spokesperson Alan Tanjusay said his union will push Duterte to fulfil his promise to workers to end the 5-5-5 scheme where workers are hired for five months, fired and rehired for another five months to prevent them from getting full-time contracts.

DOLE has already issued Department Order 18-A to prohibit 5-5-5 contracts, but trade unions say that companies still circumvent the law.

In addition, the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) Committee on the Application of Standards (CAS) recently found violations of ILO Conventions 87 and 98 in the Philippines, which guarantee the rights of workers to freedom of association, the right to organise and collective bargaining.

Matula, who attended the CAS meeting at the International Labor Conference in Geneva this June said the ILO will send its team to Manila to look into the numerous murders of trade unionists [2].

He said the situation of trade unions has improved over the years there have still been a total of 65 extrajudicial murders involving trade unionists, not to mention continuing widespread harassment during labour disputes. Fifteen murders took place during President Benigno Aquino’s six-year administration from 2010 to 2016, while 50 people were killed during Gloria Macapagal Arroyo’s presidency between 2001 and 2010.

Amongst the recommendations for the Philippine government, the CAS has called for the implementation of the “necessary measures to bring an end to impunity in relation to violence against trade unionists and request once again that it institute independent investigations to ensure that the intellectual and material authors of the crimes are arrested, tried and if guilty appropriately sanctioned.”

The ILO is also urging the Philippine government to “ensure that all workers...have a legal right to exercise their right to freedom of association.”

Duterte has built an image of a tough leader who can bring an end to drugs and crime, but trade unions are calling on the new president to be just as tough on abusive employers and labour right violations.

“Workers confronting problems such as inadequate wages, unsafe and unhealthy workplaces, absence or lack of social protection and a weak voice, should be given attention,” said Matula.

**Estrella Torres**

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\* Equal Times. 30 June 2016:

[http://www.equaltimes.org/what-can-workers-in-the?lang=en#.V9wY\\_Y9OKUm](http://www.equaltimes.org/what-can-workers-in-the?lang=en#.V9wY_Y9OKUm)

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**Footnotes**

[1] <http://www.psa.gov.ph/statistics/survey/labor-force>

[2] <http://www.equaltimes.org/philippines-murder-highlights-the#.V3Tkhnu9b3V>